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INTRODUCTION: THE *ENTENTE CORDIALE* AND THE SEA SERPENT

Philip Bell

Serge Sazonov, the Russian foreign minister before the Great War, once said of the Triple Entente between Britain, France and Russia that its existence “was no better authenticated than that of a sea serpent”. In this centenary year, I am tempted to transfer this remark to the Entente Cordiale. Sightings of this creature are frequently reported. Photographs show Queen Elizabeth II in conversation with President Jacques Chirac. Prime Minister Tony Blair has addressed President Chirac on TV as “Jacques,” which sounds terribly cordial. The royal Mint has struck coins bearing the inscription “Entente Cordiale 1904–2004,” and depicting a strange double-headed figure made up of Britannia and Marianne. And yet a nagging doubt persists: is there really solid evidence that the *Entente Cordiale* exists?

In one respect we must accept at once that the existence of the Entente is indeed better authenticated than that of the sea serpent. In this very building (The National Archives) we can hold in our hands certain documents signed on 8 April 1904: a convention respecting Newfoundland and West and Central Africa; a declaration respecting Egypt and Morocco; secret articles attached to this declaration; and a declaration concerning Siam, Madagascar and the New Hebrides—this last document being firmly hand-written in a good round script. These documents embodied a number of colonial deals, reached according to the methods of the old diplomacy. The British were to have a free hand in Egypt, which they had occupied since 1882 but where they had been constantly harassed by French obstruction, and the French were to have a free hand in Morocco, which they intended to occupy at some stage in the future. The agreements also defined boundaries between French and British colonies in West Africa, allotted spheres of influence in Siam, agreed on a condominium in the New Hebrides, and settled disputes over fishing rights off Newfoundland. All these matters had been discussed in strict

This was originally delivered as the keynote lecture at the Entente Centenary Conference in June 2004.

secrecy, and with little regard to the wishes of the peoples concerned, or of the existing rulers of Morocco, Egypt or Siam.

These agreements also marked a move in European politics. Foreign minister Théophile Delcassé intended that they should lead on to an alliance with Britain, to strengthen the French position against Germany. The British did not intend to go down that road, and Lord Lansdowne was not prepared to incur the formal obligations of an alliance with France. But during the very next year, 1905, Lansdowne himself proposed close consultation with the French, directed against Germany. His successor as foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, made the entente with France the basis of his policy. Secret military staff conversations worked out detailed arrangements to send a British expeditionary force to France in the event of war with Germany, and naval talks agreed that the French fleet should hold the western Mediterranean while the Royal Navy concentrated on the North Sea. The possibility of war against Germany on the side of France was well in sight, though by no means certain.

The Entente was thus in its origins and early years a colonial deal and a combination against Germany. Of these two aspects not a shred remains. The British and French empires have vanished almost completely, and with them the imperial cast of mind which was still strong in 1904. The under secretary at the Foreign Office, introducing the debate on the Anglo–French agreement in the House of Commons spoke of “the inevitable dissolution of ancient barbarisms when brought into contact with the march of Western civilisation”—which is not a sentiment we hear very often nowadays. The secret diplomacy which produced the agreements is also remembered with distaste, and was supposedly abandoned, as early as 1919, in favour of open covenants openly arrived at. (It is true that neither imperialism nor secret diplomacy has entirely vanished from the face of the earth, but we must let that pass.) The colonial deal between Britain and France is a thing of the past, and remembered only to be deplored.

As for Britain and France combining against Germany, such an association is now inconceivable. The boot is on the other foot. Under the terms of the Franco–German Treaty of Paris of 1963 the French and Germans hold summit meetings twice a year, and in practice meet more frequently than that. In April 1969 President Charles de Gaulle, in the month of his resignation, told Maurice Schumann, the one-time broadcaster for *France Libre*, that no French foreign policy could be conceived which was not founded on “the irreversibility of Franco-German reconciliation.” Less formally, he remarked on another occasion: “Europe is Germany and ourselves. Les autres, c’est les légumes.” (At the time, the vegetables were Italy and the Benelux countries.) Giscard d’Estaing, in his seven years as president, held the prescribed 14 summit meetings with the West German Chancellor, plus another 10 less formal meetings. Later, President

François Mitterrand and Chancellor Helmut Kohl always had breakfast together at summit meetings of the EEC, to plan out the day's work. Jacques Attali once observed with delight that they agreed to nominate Jacques Delors as the next president of the European Commission without even mentioning his name—"A masterpiece of dialogue between two allies who had no need to go into details to understand one another." This close Franco-German relationship deserves some emphasis, because Britain usually finds itself outside this magic circle. We are sometimes told that one prime minister or another has joined the club, but it never quite comes off. An article in *The Economist* on the centenary of the Entente stated simply that "France and Germany are enmeshed in a way that would be unthinkable for the French and British." The British must get used to the Franco-German couple.

The two main characteristics of the Entente of 1904, the colonial deals and anti-German combination, have vanished. The Entente of a hundred years ago no longer exists. What about the Entente today? On big foreign policy issues, Britain and France have been in opposition. When the Americans attacked the Taliban regime in Afghanistan at the end of 2001, Britain joined in with substantial forces, while France remained no more than a cautious and limited participant. In 2003 Britain took a large part in the American invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, while France opposed the war and followed a separate diplomatic line at the United Nations. This difference in policy continues to this day, and has at times been accompanied by personal friction between foreign ministers and between Prime Minister Blair and President Chirac. The triangular relationship between Britain, France and the United States, which has never been easy, is going through a particularly difficult phase. (Incidentally, it was with a real *frisson* that I read in Paul Cambon's letters the comment he made in August 1904 as ambassador at London that the British "never lose an opportunity to humiliate themselves before the Americans." A hundred years later a Frenchman might well say *Plus ça change*.)

The issue of European integration provides another bone of contention. In 1999 Blair wrote in a foreword to a pamphlet on *Britain and France: Partners for the Millenium* that the two countries were "committed partners in the European Union." He forebore to add that they differ markedly in the nature and degree of their commitment. Even with a prime minister who is in principle in favour of joining the eurozone, the British government has not yet put the question to a referendum. Britain and France are uneasy partners at best.

The military aspect of Franco-British relations is in better shape. There is a considerable degree of cooperation between the armed services of the two countries. Since 1997 the chiefs of staff and their deputies have met twice a year. The military staffs hold annual talks; the navies join in

various exercises; a joint Air Group was set up in 1998. And while the staff talks before 1914 were kept secret, the existence of current military contacts is published for all to see on the Ministry of Defence website. The two countries have been willing to cooperate, up to a point, in setting up a European Rapid Reaction Force, an idea agreed upon at a Franco-British summit meeting at St. Malo in December 1998, though in practice the rate of progress has been far from rapid. It has become something of a commonplace to say that the organization of Europe for military purposes cannot be envisaged except in terms of Franco-British cooperation, which is probably true. The trouble is that such cooperation is much less important than it once was. The British and French staffs work closely together, but the forces they can deploy are small in number and power compared to those of the United States. A close military cooperation which might have been immensely valuable before 1939 is now of only marginal significance.

Outside high politics and military affairs, there is the remarkable phenomenon that people are crossing the Channel in vast numbers. In the year 2000 there were nearly 12 million visits from the United Kingdom to France, and 3 million in the opposite direction — a striking statistic which shows, or perhaps only confirms, that the British are keener to travel to France than the other way about. Many of the British visits were simply day trips to Calais to buy drink, but there were (and are) many British people who are buying property in France, whether as holiday homes or permanent residences; and the new British property-owners come from a far wider range of society than those who lived in Nice or Cannes before 1914, “when the Riviera was ours.” In the other direction, Britain has little appeal to French holiday home buyers. (I am still waiting for some French equivalent of Peter Mayle, who will write a best-seller about the delights of a year in Yorkshire.) But the French are coming to work in Britain in increasing numbers, and the Eurostar has made London an attractive posting for employees of French companies.

How much these movements of people, and the changing attitudes that go with them, affect relations between the two countries is doubtful. By getting along together, living and working in one another’s countries, and through many daily contacts, the British and French peoples are probably closer together now than at any other period, when links were mainly between elites; yet this leaves the political problems largely untouched.

Nothing remains of the Entente of 1904, with its colonial deals and anti-German motives. At present, relations between the British and French governments display a good deal of friction, only partly tempered (if at all) by the mingling of their peoples. What about the century that lies between? There would be little point in going through a hundred years of Franco-British relations, even at a good round trot; and in any case there

are many papers to follow. But no-one will dispute that there have been ups and downs! Rather strangely, aspects of the two World Wars figure on the plus side. On state visits, when the leaders of the two countries set out to emphasize what unites them, speech-writers turn repeatedly towards wartime experiences. During the royal visit to France by George VI in 1938, the French radio broadcast an "Ode à l' Angleterre" in honour of the British war dead—"Soldats anglais couchés dessous une croix blanche/Héros de la Bassée et vainqueurs de Vimy." In 1992, during another royal visit to France, the French premier, Pierre Bérégovoy, made a moving speech about the young men of both countries who died for liberty and were not forgotten. In April 2004, president Chirac's speech at the state banquet during the Queen's visit to Paris referred to Britain protecting the flame of French resistance during the years of Nazi occupation; and the Queen conferred a decoration on an 89-year old British woman who had been an accomplished saboteur with the Resistance. The sentiments are doubtless real, and the honour certainly well deserved, but such memories fade with time, and comradeship in the World Wars is a wasting asset for the Entente.

The low points in Franco-British relations have been numerous, and sometimes virtually continuous. The Great War had its fair share of disputes between the Allies, and so did the Paris Peace Conference. Between the wars each country felt that the other was letting it down, often with much truth—the British made a separate naval agreement with Germany in 1935 without even informing the French; while during the Ethiopian crisis of 1935–6 the French denied support to Britain at crucial points. Michael Dockrill has devoted a book to *British Official Perceptions of France, 1936–1940*, which were sometimes comical, sometimes tragical, but rarely amicable! During the Second World War, relations between Prime Minister Winston Churchill and de Gaulle were often explosive, and one of their quarrels, on 4 June 1944, two days before D Day, left an enduring scar on relations between their two countries. De Gaulle understood Churchill to say that, in the event of disagreement between the United States and France, Britain would always choose the former, and that whenever there was a choice between Europe and "le grand large," Britain would choose "le grand large." This was not exactly what Churchill said, and certainly did not represent the essence of his thinking; but de Gaulle's impression of the occasion never faded. He was to recall it nearly 20 years later, when preparing to reject Britain's first application to join the EEC. President Chirac, who likes to think of himself as de Gaulle's heir, used the term "le grand large" earlier this year. The general picture was confirmed after the failure of the Suez expedition in 1956, when the British decided that never again must they act without American support or against American wishes, while the French were reinforced in their commitment to Europe.

There is no need to go on. The picture is distinctly bleak. The original bases for the Entente in 1904 have disappeared. Present relations between the British and French governments are badly strained. On the whole, the intervening hundred years have witnessed more disagreement than harmony between the two countries. Yet here we are, in the centenary year of the Entente, which is being marked in both countries by politicians, the media, and after our own fashion by historians. The substance of the *Entente Cordiale* appears threadbare, and yet the phrase is in constant use. Why is this? What accounts for the longevity of the phrase, and what sort of essence lies behind it? Are we looking for a sea serpent which we are not likely to find, or for a living creature which we can describe from observation? Let me look at how the two countries have seen one another at certain crucial points.

It is worth starting at the beginning, because from the start the agreements of April 1904 were not solely a matter of power politics, but were regarded in Britain as having a special character which transcended their workaday details. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the leader of the Liberal Party, described the agreement as “a great instrument for bringing together two neighbouring nations and two old rivals . . . and for promoting friendship and cooperation between the two nations of Europe most identified with progress and freedom.” Arthur Balfour, the Conservative prime minister, wound up the debate in the Commons by claiming that “this great instrument will be looked back upon as the beginning of a new and happier era in our international relations.” The Entente was thus launched on a wave of cross-party goodwill. By February 1914 the MPs who moved and seconded the Address at the opening of Parliament were only too happy, among the bitter strife over Home Rule, to find a non-controversial subject by welcoming the forthcoming visit by King George V and Queen Mary to France. One of the speakers referred to the cordial relations between the two countries, “which nature and temperament seem at once to mark out and to bring together as the vigilant parents of freedom and of justice.” The visit itself marked the tenth anniversary of the Entente, and president Raymond Poincaré spoke of “the considered wishes of two powerful nations, equally attached to peace, equally passionately devoted to progress, equally accustomed to the ways of liberty. . . . After a long rivalry . . . France and Britain have learned to have affection for each other, to think alike and to unite their efforts.” These words doubtless sound like platitudes and wishful thinking; but even in wishful thinking, it is well worth noting what people were wishing for.

Let us jump to 1944, the 40th year of the Entente. We remember it as the year of the great quarrel between Churchill and de Gaulle, which I have already mentioned. But it was also the year of a recovery of friendship. On the French side, Jacques Debu-Bridel, one of the earliest *résistants*,

visited London in the autumn of 1944 and set down his impressions in a book, *Carthage n'est pas détruite*. He admired the voluntary discipline and civic spirit of the British people, and he found a sense of unity between Britain and France which sprang from a shared civilisation—or rather, “une seule et même civilisation,” which is more emphatic. At the same time, Pierre Bourdan was writing a much longer and more profound book on Britain and its people, *Perplexités et grandeur de Il 'Angleterre*. Bourdan was deeply impressed by the immense strength which Britain drew from its tradition and continuity, at that time almost unique in Europe, where almost every other country had suffered defeat, occupation or revolution. Yet he found that the British could also adapt their traditions, as they had succeeded in doing during the trials of war. He too was impressed by the common civilisation which bound Britain and France together. He wrote in his *carnets* when embarking for Normandy with General Philippe Leclerc's famous Second Armoured Division that he was leaving one of the last bastions of a civilisation “which was also our own.” Now, no-one would claim that these two writers represented France, but even so they wrote for a substantial French readership, and they stood in a line of French writers who had interpreted Britain to their fellow-countrymen with a keen yet critical admiration—André Siegfried and Jacques Bardoux are obvious examples.

On the British side, there were a number of ardent Francophiles who had felt utterly bereft when France was defeated and occupied in 1940, but had never lost faith. Alexander Werth wrote in 1942 that “The future of Europe needs . . . a France whose creative genius will once again shine across the world after the years of twilight and darkness.” After the Liberation, Raymond Mortimer, the literary editor of the *New Statesman*, devoted all his space in one issue to a discussion of the first non-clandestine number of *Les Lettres françaises*, while *Time and Tide* once gave up its books pages entirely to the publications of *Les Editions du Minuit*. It is striking that the editors concerned took it for granted that their readers would be happy with these arrangements. In October 1944 Charles Morgan (now, I think, a forgotten name, but then a literary star) visited Paris and heard his “Ode to France” declaimed at the *Comédie Française* in the presence of de Gaulle himself, and wrote to a friend “An Englishman can't ask much more of life.” Incidentally (or not so incidentally), this glow of admiration for French culture came at the same time as British popular opinion was grumbling that the French in Normandy seemed to have plenty to eat, and that the autumn Paris fashion shows demonstrated an incurable frivolity.

These views across the Channel were in a broad sense characteristic of their time—which is I think now long past. A French elite admired British stability and civic virtue; a British elite admired French culture, and

especially literature. Both were conscious of belonging to a common civilisation, which had just had a very close call. Both elites were, almost by definition, far removed from the concerns of most people, French and British, who were simply trying to live from day to day among the stresses of war, and for whom a country across the Channel might well have been on another planet.

Fast forward ten years, and we arrive at 1954 and the 50th anniversary of the *Entente Cordiale*, which was widely marked in both countries. The French National Assembly sent a message of goodwill to the House of Commons where Anthony Eden, Clement Attlee, Clement Davies and Jenny Lee all spoke warmly of the Entente; so cross-party support was strongly maintained. The Queen and the President of the Republic exchanged messages, and so did the two prime ministers, Joseph Laniel and Churchill, and the two foreign ministers, Georges Bidault and Eden. These formal courtesies are worth emphasizing, because they showed that the Entente had a high profile in politics and in the public mind. The tone of comments in the press, which were plentiful, looked back to wartime comradeship; made good resolutions to forge a new entente; and offered mixed speculations about the future. In Paris there was a widespread hope that the British would restrain the Americans from rash actions—a long article in *Combat* argued that Britain was the best guarantor of peace, because the British would not let the Americans drag them (and others) into an ideological crusade. *The Times* judged that the Entente faced a serious difficulty on the question of the extent to which Britain could or would be “continentally involved”; while the French journalist “Pertinax,” writing in the *Telegraph*, wondered whether the roots of the Entente were being severed because France had embarked on an experiment in the fusion of sovereignty in the Coal and Steel Community, to which the British were obsessively opposed. These proved farsighted comments. In our own day, the British government, far from restraining the Americans, has joined them in a sort of ideological crusade in Iraq; while the question of the degree of British involvement with the continent has never been fully settled.

By the time the 90th anniversary of the Entente was reached in 1994 it was plain that doubts and troubles had accumulated. *The Times*, in a leading article, felt obliged to point out that “France is, in fact, the friend, ally and partner of Great Britain, and not her enemy”—something which could no longer be taken for granted, but had to be said. *Le Monde* marked the occasion with a long article, noting that in recent years England had succumbed to her old temptation of isolation from Europe, while France had achieved reconciliation with Germany; the two countries had thus turned away from one another, and the Entente seemed no more than a golden but fleeting moment of friendship. A former editor of

Le Monde, André Fontaine, contributed a long article to *The Economist*, observing that the two countries were each in its own way insular—Britain because it was geographically an island, France because of an insular cast of mind. Each was acutely conscious of its individuality, and “To affirm one’s singularity is, by definition, to cultivate one’s differences.” Among those differences, Fontaine seized particularly upon language, which created crucial barriers of resentment on the French side and incomprehension on the British. The French were anxious, even desperate, to protect the standing and influence of their language, an attitude which the British regarded with an indifference which only exasperated the French further. Charles Bremner, the long-serving *Times* correspondent in Paris, took up the same point: “French civilisation is being drowned by its ancestral Anglophone rival,” and French civilisation was afraid of Anglo-Saxon (meaning mostly American) cultural supremacy. Europe was still a point of conflict. Fontaine appealed to the French and British to stop wrangling about Europe, and instead to “try to settle on a common answer to this question of what Europe should become.” This was unlikely. Since the Second World War, the French had thrown themselves into building a Europe created in their own image; most of the French political establishment believed that Britain did not really want to take part in this new Europe, which would have to be achieved against British opposition.

Things did not seem much changed by the opening of the Channel Tunnel. This was the end of an old story—one historian of the Tunnel counted no fewer than 138 projects for a fixed link, whether tunnel or bridge, since the first in 1802; and the fate of these projects had formed a barometer of the state of relations between the two countries. When the deed was finally accomplished, the French press with almost one voice proclaimed that England was no longer an island. The British newspapers tended to agree, but were not sure whether they welcomed the new state of affairs. Anyway, what did the tunnel signify? The *Guardian* brought out a special joint edition with *Libération*, in which the *Guardian*’s editor predicted that in the future the date of the Tunnel’s opening would be engraved on peoples’ memories, while that of the Normandy landings would become merely an obscure anniversary. (I wonder whether the date, 6 May 1994, is indeed engraved on our memories?) François Bédarida, on the other hand, doubted whether the Tunnel would have much effect on attitudes on either side of the Channel. Rivalries between the two countries were the legacy of history and a part of national identity. Metaphorically, he wrote, the train of prejudice was still on the rails, and it was unlikely that the TGV would actually displace it. This has proved very near the mark. The Tunnel has become prosaic. For two centuries a dream for some and a nightmare for others, it has proved to be merely a slightly unusual stretch of railway line.

So we return to the present day. What is the best that politicians and the press now find to say about relations between Britain and France? In 2003 Blair and Chirac declared at Le Touquet that “There is more that unites us than divides us”; though they did not say exactly what. Jack Straw, then foreign secretary, asserted that our countries share the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which they aspire to extend across the globe. Dominique de Villepin, who until recently was the French foreign minister and is now prime minister, has assured us that in Franco-British relations “the search for agreement and the habit of dialogue are firmly entrenched,” and that we are able to surmount differences thanks to the friendship that unites us and the values we share. The *Guardian* claimed in a leading article (5 April 2004) that the Entente embodied the principle that disputes between states are better settled by diplomacy than by war, and that Britain and France are nations with shared problems, interests and values.

It is pretty thin stuff. Is there anything of more substance? The *Guardian* has again got together with *Libération* to produce a special supplement for the centenary. One article claimed that Chirac and Blair had developed “a surprising rapport,” but spent most of its space describing their disagreements and personal quarrels, and ended by quoting an unenthusiastic Downing Street official as saying that “We are two countries who are condemned to live together.” There was a long article by Peter Mayle, telling us that he finds France a wonderful place to live in; and two pages of exchange articles by cultural critics, which to my mind shed little light on a common culture. The *Independent* also produced a special supplement, including a long article on the middle-class English invasion of Normandy; a much shorter article on two French families living in London, where they found the prices high and the people cold; and (believe it or not) an interview with Peter Mayle. And yet, as I began by saying, there has been no lack of visits and meetings, and positive show-ers of compliments.

Are we left with the sea serpent? Perhaps so. It has always seemed to me that people *want* to believe in the Loch Ness monster, and it is apparently the case that various people *want* to believe in the *Entente Cordiale*; which raises the question of why they wish to do so. There is another question: what is the entente that people want to believe in? And here I must change the analogy. We are not looking at the sea serpent, but at Proteus, Neptune’s herdsman who could change his shape at will. The name *Entente Cordiale* has remained unchanged for a hundred years—the index to *The Times* introduced a special heading for it in January 1905. This represents a remarkable triumph for the power of a name, of which any public relations man would be proud—as far as I know, the phrase goes back to King Louis Philippe in 1844, though there are other

contenders. What's in a name? Rather a lot. To give someone or something a name is an act of powerful symbolism—strong magic, even. The attraction of the name *Entente Cordiale* seems irresistible, and it seems that there is still some adhesive quality at work. But the meaning attached to the name has changed repeatedly. Even in this brief survey, we have observed: in 1904, imperialism, power politics and common values; in 1944, cultural admiration and a common civilisation; in 1954, wartime memories tempered by unease about European integration; in 1994, fading wartime memories plus hopes pinned to the Channel Tunnel; and in 2004 common values plus British property-owners in the Dordogne. All these different aspects have been subsumed under the heading of *Entente Cordiale*, which is used to signify Franco-British relations in their better moments and seen in their best light. The name will doubtless be with us for some time yet, and it signifies something more than a mythical sea-serpent; but what it represents is a Protean figure, a shape-shifter, hard to get hold of.

What do we expect of an entente between states? We may put it like this: a similar political and cultural outlook; compatible (not necessarily identical) interests; and a broad confidence in one another. Britain and France still share a common civilisation, and have a marked similarity of political and cultural outlook, and much shared history, even if it is a story of conflict as much as harmony. But how far are their interests compatible, on the important issues of European integration and relations with the United States? How much confidence do they have in one another, and how much doubt or plain antagonism arises between them? The answers, it seems to me, are not encouraging. There remains some foundation for an entente, but it is a slender basis for the superstructure which is sometimes placed upon it.

